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Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Representation of the Clash between the Orient and the Occident

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Abstract: This paper attempts to trace how Shakespeare's *Othello* reflects the deep-rooted Eurocentric ideology of the Elizabethan people and show how such views created distinctions like self vs. other, master vs. slave, civilized vs. savage, white vs. black, good vs. evil, strong vs. weak, occident vs. orient. These views had such a deep impact that many writers have portrayed the Europeans as superior and the 'self' as belonging to the 'centre' or 'Occident,' whereas people in far-away lands are shown as inferior and the 'other' belonging to the 'margin' or 'Orient'. In Elizabethan England, African men were regarded as illiterate, barbaric, lustful womanizers who were the white man's property and apt to be used as servants. These views have been handed down century after century. However, in the play *Othello* Shakespeare breaks away from these beliefs and introduces an African man who disregards such stereotypical views and thus shocking his audience with this deviation from the norm. He presents a reality that African men are indeed polite, educated, loyal and faithful husbands. Shakespeare even makes Othello more prejudiced against his own culture than against another race.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare sets a mood that questions the way a person sees his or herself and the world around. Shakespeare's depiction of Othello departs from the stereotype established by his cultural predecessors. To understand the matter well, we will have to try to define the word 'Moor', explore how these oriental people were regarded in Elizabethan England and finally conclude by pointing out how Shakespeare differed from his own society and culture.

The whereabouts of unknown 'dark' worlds have always appealed to travelers from European. This fascination gave rise to the discovery of the oriental East via land routes and across the Mediterranean towards the Atlantic Ocean. These explorations made in pursuit of slaves, gold, ivory, slaves and resources laid the foundation for imperial intercourse through trade and travel with those mysterious lands. These European colonizers divided the world into two different sections - the West or the Occident and the East or the Orient. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient exhibited a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."⁸ Western imperialism had despised the colonized lands and their inhabitants as backward, savage as well as exotic. Therefore, the imaginary friction and geographical breach between the imperial center and its peripheries constituted the concepts of imperial superiority, attitudes and experiences.

The Elizabethans considered the far-away lands, its people and culture as exotic and mysterious with all the negative attributes of darkness. Said also points out the generalized notions of the Orient, "its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness and so forth"⁹ that form the history and perceptions of the world. Othello's tales are very much exciting and are laden with the mystery and mysterious pleasures of the Orient. Not only do we come to learn that he was 'sold to slavery', but also he faced:

...cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads

⁸ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2001. p.5.

⁹ Ibid. p.72

Do grow beneath their shoulders.

(I, ii.143-145)

It is at this very point that Desdemona does 'seriously incline', and at this point, too, Othello shifts his focus from himself to Desdemona. The fascination can be placed, as Kim F. Hall has stressed in her discussion of travelers' tales in early modern England, in 'not only...the mysteries and "strangeness" they depict but in the yet-untold marvels that they present to the potential future travelers'¹⁰ wonders which expose restrained attitudes to the body. Othello himself, since, he is a part of the exotic cultures which he describes, can be regarded as Desdemona's 'new-found-land' at this point.

Said states that there is a line drawn between the East and the West¹¹. Said and his followers voiced that the East and the West stay in a dual vicious circle: civilization versus backwardness, humanity versus barbarism, religion versus atheism and so on. In history and culture, we get to see "European superiority over Oriental backwardness"¹² as the so-called advanced Europeans believed that the exotic oriental lands cannot have independent history or culture. Therefore, these barbarian territories should be ruled and be under the hegemony of the Occidentals who took up the challenge of bringing civilization to those backward lands of the Orient.

Othello's oriental characteristics and physical aura have kindled manifold divisions among the doyennes of English Literature. These Shakespearean critics have notably diverged in their views with regard to Othello's depiction in the play. A.C. Bradley, for example, asserts that "in regard to the essentials of his character" Othello's race is of no importance, and that Shakespeare would have laughed if anyone had praised him on "the accuracy of his racial psychology."¹³ G.K. Hunter and Eldred Jones have argued that Shakespeare criticizes the ongoing negative Elizabethan stereotypes of Africans by invoking them on the stage. William Hazlitt, one of the most prominent Shakespeare researchers of the early nineteenth century, seems to suggest a reason as to why Othello's character changes throughout the course of the play. He states that "the nature of the Moor is noble, confiding, tender, and generous but his blood is of the most inflammable kind."¹⁴

The question of Othello's exact race is debatable. Historians have trouble determining who exactly the Moors were. What is known is that the Moors were people, possibly of Berber and Arab origin, settled in Northern Africa. It is learnt that in the eight century, people called Moors conquered the Iberian Peninsula, which contains both today's Spain and Portugal. They were eventually forced out of their last bastion in Southern Spain in the year 1492, which corresponds to Columbus's sailing to the New World.

The word 'Moor' is an obscure term mainly used in Medieval and Renaissance England to refer to the 'Moors', 'blackmoors', 'Negroes', 'Indians', or 'Muslims'. As critics have established, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these terms were more often used interchangeably one instead of another despite the fact that the English came to recognize the distinctions between different types of blacks.¹⁵ European people have historically pinpointed a number of related ethnic groups as "Moors". Sometimes "Moor" is communicatively used for any person with North African origin. Some people, to whom it is applied, think of the term as irreverent and racist. Jack D'Amico, in his introduction to *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, states that "as an opposite in race, religion, and disposition, the Moor can be used to confirm the superiority of Western values"¹⁶

Both the Elizabethan dramatists and audiences found the exotic stories about the Orient and its people appealing.¹⁷ The logic behind using Africa as a setting by dramatists in the Occident is that such an act, conceivably, would bring more excitement to the theatre.

Shakespeare, in *Titus Andronicus*, introduces an evil Moor called Aaron whom we see changed towards the end and showing goodness when he pleads for his child's life. A Moor also appears in *The Merchant of Venice*. He comes from the Oriental country Morocco. He is the Prince and he is a potential suitor for Portia's hand in marriage. Even before he arrives to make his bid for her, he becomes a subject of Portia's racist remarks. The dichotomy between East or the Orient and West or the Occident is emphasized once again.

¹⁰ Kim H. Hall. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. Cornell University Press, 1995.

¹¹ Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. p.57

¹² Ibid.p.7

¹³ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 187.

¹⁴ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*. London: C.H. Reynell, 1817.

¹⁵ Antony G. Barthelemy, *Black Face Malignd Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne*, London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987, pp. 5-17.

¹⁶ Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, Florida: University of South Florida Press, 1991, p. 2.

¹⁷ Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 37.

Othello is often addressed as 'the Moor', not with his actual name. This, on the one hand, debilitates Shakespeare's effort to emphasize Othello's race and Oriental descent, and, on the other hand, places Othello into the scheme of the stereotype, despite his honorable and special nature.

Elizabethans thought of Moors as being dark strangers. They did not have a clear picture in mind, they came to know about them when Shakespeare and his contemporaries described people with darker skins as black and Moors. Virginia M. Vaughan, in her book entitled *Othello. A contextual history*, points out that "blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed a black man,...the terms Moor and Negro used almost interchangeably."¹⁸ Therefore it is very confusing and unclear how dark the color of the Moor's skin in *Othello* actually was in Shakespeare's time.

However, Moors were, without any doubt, regarded as being exotic and different from the Europeans themselves. It is important to mention that the Elizabethan audience had a stereotype in mind when they saw Othello being performed on the stage. Elizabethan playwrights obtained their stories about the Orient from four main sources: returning fighters who fought against the Muslims in the Medieval period; history books and published travel narratives that were available at that time; the living merchants and traders who travelled to the Orient; and, most importantly, the stories of those captives who were captured by Moorish and Turkish pirates through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Shakespeare attempted to create a realistic portrait of a Moor for this protagonist. The protagonist in Cinthio's novella called "Un Capitano Moro" ("A Moorish Captain"), is an absolute stereotype, notorious in Venice only for being black, jealous, and vengeful. Shakespeare's protagonist is not only liberally complex but also individualized and differentiated from Venetian society in his posture, and, most importantly, his language, with its unusual poetical rhythms, splendor, and eccentricity. Moreover, Lois Whitney claims that many of Othello's specific attributes probably were derived from Shakespeare's reading of Leo Africanus's, *Geographical Historie of Africa*.¹⁹ Othello's Oriental aura and his otherness delighted the exclusively white European people. In the same way the Barbary ambassador to the Queen, Abdel Ouahed bin Messaoud with his sixteen delegates, used to draw attention from Londoners with their native dresses, customs and behavior. This Moorish ambassador sometimes was claimed as an inspiration for Othello.

Although *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, the sentiments and values shared in the text by the members of Venetian society are probably reflective of the attitudes and values of Shakespeare's own society. During the time *Othello* was written, the English were becoming more and more conscious of the presence of other races in the world. People started travelling a lot and in Europe, blacks were beginning to be used for the slave trade.

Othello contains one of the most powerful, disputable representations of the black other in Elizabethan drama. The portrayal of the Moor in Othello, oftentimes contradictory, surfaces the wide-spread racial attitudes of the time period, and has continued to generate insight into removing social disagreements throughout the centuries since its performance. Despite Othello's unclear true race, his status as a foreigner or outsider truly influences the racial effects of the play. Being from a different race meant, for the most part, being an Other, non-English, as well as non-Christian. This utter otherness can also be seen in the subtitle of the play itself (The Moor of Venice), which describes the main character not in terms of his social role but only in terms of race. Interestingly enough, in spite of his Oriental background Othello is initially considered honorable; but when race is associated with multiracial sexual and marital unions that it turns into a passionate sentimental issue for the Venetians, and for the members of the audience in the seventeenth century.

It may be assumed that, because Othello kills his wife Desdemona after the shrewd plots of Iago, then perhaps Othello is as much as a victim of Iago's evil designs and Desdemona is as much as Othello's extreme anger. Some may protest that Iago's plot to prepare the downfall of the Moor is much more worse because it stems out of a diabolical, calculating mind, as opposed to Othello's sin, which is committed because he has become a mere pawn in Iago's hands, blinded by injury, destroyed by his own candor. However, it can be

¹⁸ Virginia M. Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History*, Cambridge: CUP, p.64.

¹⁹ Leo Africanus's book *Geographical Historie of Africa* was originally written in Arabic. It was collected and translated into English by John Pory in 1600. It has been suggested that William Shakespeare may have been inspired by Leo Africanus' book to create the character of Othello.

claimed that Othello allows himself to be manipulated. Iago's suggestions of Desdemona's infidelity only supplies the alibi Othello needs to justify the murder of the wife, who he believes, cannot sincerely love him. It can be argued that Desdemona's murder is a result of Othello's pride and rush to judgment and, as a result, he must be held responsible for his action.

Unlike Iago, Othello, has the potential to form strong, loving and affectionate relationships; his sincere friendship with Iago substantiates this fact. Othello allows Iago to influence him, and allows Iago to bring out his most evil characteristics from. Although Iago may be the one with the more innately evil nature, Othello does not do much to prevent his base instincts taking control over him. In order to find out why Othello commits his crime and why he should be held responsible for it, we have to analyze the hidden intention behind it. It may not be wrong to claim that what actually prompts Othello to commit murder is not his being mentally impaired and manipulated by Iago, but rather his pride and lack of confidence which he allows him to gain control. Othello is a strong leader, very assertive in his ability to cope with military matters, but when it comes to personal qualities he is uncertain and hesitant. He has arrived in a new city with different customs, but he is not well-aware of it. He has a new young and beautiful bride, whom he loves. He is quite puzzled as to why Desdemona would choose him for a husband, and can only bring one possible explanation, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd." (1.3.167)

Shakespeare is emphasizing the well-known fact that Othello greatly differs from the society he lives in. Desdemona's murder, as critics say, is significant in the sense that it helps Othello's innate barbaric nature resurface. It is a well-established fact that Othello is an honorary white. He certainly is pretty conscious of the prevailing prejudice in Venice and certainly must question why Desdemona would disregard her culture and fellow white Venetians by marrying a black man. Othello is in doubts about Desdemona before Iago starts his act of conspiracy. Despite the fact that his wife shows nothing but genuine love for him, Othello cannot wholeheartedly believe in her love. Othello is going to speculate that Desdemona's tenderness and virtue alone make her to fall in love with the unlovable and the unlikely. When Iago does rupture Othello's whimsical image of Desdemona, he is just fueling what Othello, deep down, believes to be totally probable: that Desdemona could very well love another man. Iago dexterously argues that Desdemona is pretty much capable of betrayal because she has already shown it by betraying her own race.

At the outset of the play we are informed that Brabantio willingly lets him enter his house before he elopes with Desdemona. It is only after their inconceivable marriage that he employs this discriminatory attitude. Therefore, it is Desdemona who becomes the reason for his isolation. The matrimonial union of a black man and a white woman is not welcome in Venetian society. Desdemona shattered Othello's precarious entrance into the world of white people. This also accommodates Iago's attacks against Desdemona and the workings of racism. In Othello's last speech, he contrasts himself with a Turk.

The way Othello's character is depicted stands in strong contrast with the previously categorized Europeans' view of the Moor. Shakespeare does not only reject presenting Othello as the devilish Moor, but arguably introduces him as the protector of Christendom against invasion. Othello is a Christian. Othello is to going to defend Cyprus against the "General enemy Ottoman" (I, iii, 49). He is an essential part of Venetian civic society. He is highly sought after by the duke and senate, as proven by Cassio's remark that the senate "sent about three several quests" to look for Othello (I.ii.46). The Venetian government entrusts Othello with martial and political command in Cyprus. However, Othello shows his nobility by abandoning his sweet newly-wedded bride's chamber to join the conflict without hesitation.

The play's action shows how deep is the affection shared by Othello and Desdemona. Through the exotic and mesmerizing power of Othello's poetry and Iago's treachery, Shakespeare invites his audiences to locate the true color of villainy. Marjorie Garber, in her book *Shakespeare After All*, comments on how Shakespeare depicted his Moor, first giving him noble qualities then making him boil with jealousy and rage afterwards. She goes on to say that "here then is the key dramatic point, one typically Shakespearean at the same time establishing and critiquing a stereotype: Othello looks black, but it is Iago who become the pole of moral negativity (conventionally, blackness) in the play."²⁰

²⁰ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, Random House, 2004, p.592.

Othello murders Desdemona under the pretence of righteous outrage and will not reveal his true motive. When Othello discovers that Desdemona is absolutely pure and innocent, as the enforcer of justice he is left no choice but to commit suicide. Justice must be served and rendered, this time upon himself. Due to Othello's genuine repentance and subsequent suicide, we should not place him on the same level of villainy as Iago. But, in the meantime, his feelings of remorse after the act of cruel murder cannot be enough to exonerate him. Othello has a responsibility to give a chance to Desdemona to confront the charge of adultery. He chooses to ignore that obligation in order to satisfy his own fixations.

Shakespeare's play *Othello* is, after all, about a great man whose tragedy lies in his insistent romantic belief that the world is wholly good, that his "perfect soul" will protect him from prejudice, and that Iago could not possibly be dishonest. Yet even he sees, too late, that a devil like Iago can never be killed, only acknowledged. Othello is allowed to join the so-called Venetian society and enjoyed the words of compliment and bravery like 'valiant Moor', 'brave Moor', 'warlike Moor', 'the Moor my lord' and 'Moor...a full soldier', uttered by the leading personalities of the society. Emily Bartels holds that Othello is 'so integrated into Venetian society that he can set the terms of both military and social action.'²¹ However, it is when he dares to marry a white woman that he becomes subject to discriminatory behavior from the very people who praised him with their words of flattery. He thought he could blend into this white Occidental society, but, it is when he becomes a pawn in Iago's hands, boils with rage and jealousy that his barbaric nature surfaces and he becomes the stereotyped Oriental character that Shakespeare tries very hard to keep him away from. Othello surrenders himself to the prison of race he thought he had escaped.

Othello is a professional soldier and he is well aware of his responsibilities as the Commander of the Venetian military. As Shakespeare shows, Othello himself is quite the reverse of the stereotypical "lusty Moor". To respond to the call of arms, he delays his wedding-night happiness without hesitation, almost welcoming it in a curious way. Shakespeare is demonstrating his firm belief in merit and in the equivalence of great minds but the play is also a testimony that a happy outcome should not to be expected in an unromantic world. G.K. Hunter and Eldred Jones, in particular, have argued that Shakespeare invokes the negative Elizabethan stereotypes of Africans only to discredit them.

Critics have not arrived at any sort of consensus about the role of race in *Othello*, despite the fact that the topic of racism continues to be one of the most prevailing issues about the play. The Shakespearean scholars greatly deviate in their treatment of Othello. Coleridge honored Othello as "noble, generous, open-hearted, unsuspecting and unsuspecting."²² Indebted to Coleridge, A.C. Bradley's character analysis, even though it is a very much contested assessment of *Othello*, has been central. Bradley excessively idealizes the Moor as a romantic figure:

Othello is, in one sense of the word, by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare's heroes; and he is so partly from the strange life of war and adventure which he has lived from childhood. He does not belong to our world, and he seems to enter it we know not whence – almost as if from wonderland. There is something mysterious in his descent from men of royal siege; in his wanderings in vast deserts and among marvelous peoples...²³

However, through his tender and caring portrayal of Othello, Martin Orkin and Emily C. Bartels state that Shakespeare was criticizing racism, and putting the blame on his society for its racist behavior.

It is safe to say as we are drawing our conclusion that Shakespeare made daring and intrepid attempts to bridge the gap between the Orient and the Occident by bestowing on his hero qualities like nobility, eloquent diction, sobriety, and trustworthy that were only thought possible in white men. He also places him in an important position of as a commander of the Venetian military. He enters the play as 'noble' and 'valiant' Moor and exits as a 'blacker devil' and 'erring Barbarian.'

²¹ Emily C. Bartels, in her article entitled *Othello and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered* published in The William and Mary Quarterly magazine in 1997, comments on Othello's elevated status in the Venetian society.

²² Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*; edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor, Harvard University Press, 1930. p.227.

²³ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Penguin (Non Classics), 1991.p.153

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